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CIA

Not intelligent enough

"I am not satisfied with the quality of political intelligence", wrote President Carter last month in a terse note to the three men responsible for it: Messrs Vance, Brzezinski and, most tellingly of all, Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The president's anger is understandable. This summer the agency had blithely reported on the possibility of unrest in Iran:

Iran is not in a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary situation. Those who are in opposition do not have the capability to be more than troublesome.

That the CIA, like any pundit, should be wrong at predicting the future is neither new nor inexcusable. What is new is that the president's disquiet became public. Mr Carter's pique was, in a lesser way, like President Kennedy's criticism of the CIA for leading him into the Bay of Pigs invasion; what is inexcusable, in the opinion of many in the administration, including Mr Brzezinski, is that the agency should subsequently have been so complacent.

At the heart of the criticism is Admiral Turner. He has increasingly been the subject of attacks, often based on inspired leaks, from conservatives and liberals alike. Many of the CIA's old guard, including Mr Richard Helms, once its director and the erstwhile ambassador in Iran, believe that the agency has failed to withstand the onslaught of bad publicity over the past few years. They accuse Admiral Turner of giving into the criticism by dismantling much of the agency's operational structure, sacking its most experienced agents, and handing over its traditional work to the military intelligence services. On him they pin the full burden of the undoubtedly low morale at the agency's Langley headquarters. For the liberals, Admiral Turner has failed to impress a new morality on the agency; he is criticised for surrounding himself with men from the armed forces and for refusing to give up his rank as an admiral although he is now in a civilian job. For good measure both sides snipe at Admiral Turner for enjoying a special protection as an old Annapolis classmate of Mr Carter's: thus the president's critical note is an added blow.

These attacks, for the most part self-serving to a particular interest, have drawn debate away from the main point, the quality of the CIA's intelligence. The agency is often criticised for badly inter-

preting the mass of information the National Security Agency (the collector of electronic intelligence at Fort Meade, in Maryland) often brilliantly gets; indeed any interpretation of events is usually swamped in a mass of irrelevant material. A second, more serious, failure is that in many countries, particularly in dictatorships friendly to the west, the agency listens only to those in power. It feels almost disloyal making contacts with the illegal opposition. Thus in Iran there is strong evidence that the CIA was relying almost entirely on Savak, the Iranian secret police, adopting its information and prejudices wholesale, without knowing what weight to attach to opposition views. Having helped put the Shah into power 25 years ago in its most justifiably famous political and undercover operation, the CIA had extra grounds for not courting those who want to put him out.

Much the same problem occurred in Nicaragua. As violence broke out against President Somoza, the CIA found that it had no lines at all through to the revolutionary leaders, many of whom would, in fact, have welcomed an American contact. Thus the administration found itself caught out by events and only able to interpret them through the eyes of those whose power was being threatened. Lastly, the CIA is criticised for tailoring its intelligence reports to what it thinks the White House would like to hear.

After the senate committee under Mr Frank Church revealed the dirty tricks in the CIA's past, Vice-president Walter Mondale suggested that the agency should aim instead at providing political intelligence. Now President Carter has added his own voice. The room for improvement is evident. What is in doubt is whether the morale still exists within the agency to provide it.